DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 538 CG 028 198

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TITLE Preferred Psychological Internet Resources for Addressing Anxiety Disorders, Parenting Problems, Eating Disorders, and Chemical Dependency.

PUB DATE 1998-00-00

NOTE 13p.

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Anxiety; *Drug Addiction; *Eating Disorders; Family Problems; *Information Sources; Mental Disorders; Online Systems; Parent Materials; *Rating Scales; Research Tools; Substance Abuse; *World Wide Web

ABSTRACT

Although the Internet offers information about psychological problems and support resources for behavioral health problems, the quality of this information varies widely. So as to offer guidance in this area, preferred sites pertaining to anxiety disorders, parenting problems, eating disorders, and chemical dependency were analyzed. A total of 365 web sites were evaluated, chosen randomly from the Internet. After reviewing the appropriate clinical literature for each of the problem areas being addressed, the nine raters assessed each site's potential as a psychological resource for those in need. After ratings were completed, raters selected the preferred sites. Three sites from each category are summarized here. The top sites for anxiety disorders exhibited various strengths, ranging from support ideas, to clarity, to evaluation, to encouragement. The three parenting sites were chosen due to their abundance of parenting resources and their many suggestions for obtaining further information. All three sites for eating disorders were rated as having the most complete coverage overall, providing comprehensive surveys of important topics within a search. The last category of sites, chemical dependency, offered a variety of services and information, including on-line 12-step meetings and user-friendly interfaces. (RJM)

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Preferred Psychological Internet Resources for Addressing Anxiety Disorders Parenting Problems, Eating Disorders, and Chemical Dependency

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1998

CGO28198

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Introduction

The development of the internet offers new means of obtaining several types of psychological assistance. Various websites have been created for the purpose of providing information about psychological problems and offering support to those with a wide spectrum of behavioral health problems. Unfortunately, the quality of these sites is not regulated and therefore varies widely. Preferred sites pertaining to anxiety disorders, parenting problems, eating disorders, and chemical dependency were extracted from a sample of 365 sites related to these problems. All sites had been rated along six dimensions of quality, including accuracy, practicality, normalization, sense of belonging, referral and feedback mechanisms.

Method

A total of 365 web sites were evaluated. Each addresseed one of four problems: anxiety disorders, parenting problems, eating disorders, and chemical dependency. The sites were chosen randomly from various common search engines on the Internet. The evaluations were completed by 9 trained undergraduate psychology majors from a small liberal arts college on the east coast. After reviewing the appropriate clinical literature for each of the problem areas being addressed, the raters accessed sites in order to assess their potential as a psychological resource for those in need. Each rater evaluated roughly 40 sites, which

pertained to the one of the four categories in which the student had become most expert. After ratings were completed, raters reviewed all their choices and selected the most preferred sites for inclusion in this listing.

Preferred Sites Organized by Topic

Top three sites for anxiety disorders

http://www.fairlite.com/ocd

http://www.algy.com/anxiety/index.html

http://www.geocities.com/hotsprings/1497/index

The site http://www.fairlite.com/ocd included a great deal of support. Support and clarity were the two main objectives of this site. The support offered by this site was comprised of a wide variety of informative and helpful categories such as medications and an extensive referral section. This site was comprehensive and well organized. The information that was displayed provided an accurate and informative prospective on anxiety disorders. This site is presented so that many users, regardless of their educational and socioeconomic status, can receive the benefits of the material offered. Fairlite leaves the impression upon the reader that several options , modes of treatment, and supportive means for those suffering from anxiety disorders are available. Aside from the positive outlook, this site provides the necessary, introductory steps in order to

obtain treatment. We found this site to be an excellent starting place for understanding and coping with the many issues and problems that coincide with these disorders. In addition to this large array of positive reinforcement, fairlite, in no respect, supports commercial advertising. Thus, it reduces the risk of those inflicted with mental disorders to be exploited. Web sites such as this are models for the new wave of technology in mental health care.

The site http://www.algy.com/anxiety/index.html was given predominantly outstanding ratings in the evaluation category. It rated outstanding in every area except referral mechanisms in which it scored somewhat adequate. In addition to practical information and support, the site also incorporated additional interesting elements such as naming famous people who have anxiety disorders and organizing pen pals between people who register for them. The site is divided into several topics for exploration. These topics are comprised of an interview, treatment, support, an index, links, contacts, articles, and news. Because of the site's inclusions of interesting and numerous types of aid to those with anxiety disorders, visiting the site is enjoyable as well as greatly helpful.

The site http://www.geocities.com/hotsprings/1497/index was found to be a great source of encouragement to one with an anxiety disorder. This site is particularly unique because instead of being a site established by an esoteric psychologist lacking empathy, it was created by an individual who actually had

an anxiety disorder. In addition to traditionally helpful aspects, more unconventional devices of support are also present. The areas of the site consist of a pen pal list, a music therapy page, excerpts of her poetry, awards she received, site links, news, forums, and a list of members and their stories. This site is evidently quite helpful with a great emphasis on combating loneliness, feedback mechanisms, and promoting normalization.

Top three parenting sites:

Parentsplace.com

Parenthoodweb.com

Cybertowers.com

The Internet contains a myriad of parenting information. Yet, it is sometimes difficult to sort through and find sites that are beneficial to parents' varying needs. Some parenting sites are not complete due to advertisements, bias, and a deficit of useful information.

The top three parenting sites were chosen due to their abundance of parenting resources and diverse means of obtaining information. All three sites were well-rounded in that they all contained clear and accurate information in the form of articles, and how-to suggestions for change. The sites also contained destigmatizing information, while at the same time promoting a sense of belonging via chat lines. Referral mechanisms were given in the form of books and articles, and provisions of outcomes

assessments via response outlets.

The three sites however, did each have a specific strength. The first site, parentsplace.com focuses on parental support systems in the form of chat lines and articles by parents. Parenthoodweb.com is particularly impressive due to the non-advertisement feature. An icon was present if advertisements were desired to be viewed, otherwise no advertisements were displayed throughout the site. The last site, cybertowers.com was geared towards parents in need of information regarding their child's psychological needs. The articles presented on the site contained self-help and referral mechanisms.

These top three parenting sites are easy to access sources for obtaining effective parenting strategies, support, and advice.

Top Sites for Eating Disorders:

http://qlink.queensu.ca/~4map/anabhome.htm

http://nimh.nih.gov/publicat/eatdis.htm#eat1

http://mirror-mirror.org/eatdis.htm

http://www.something-fishy.com/articles.htm

These eating disorder sites were chosen as the best because they were rated superior in all categories. These web sites have the most complete coverage overall. The subject of eating disorders is widely varied. These sites are provide comprehensive coverage of all important topics desired within a search. The sites are informative, generally beginning with a definition of

the eating disorders. The sites describe the potential damage that could be inflicted upon the body if the eating disorder continues to go untreated. Personal stories and answers to frequently asked questions add to the benefits of the sites. Causes, diagnosis, and different treatment methods are essential and abundant on these model sites. Resources and links to other potential web sites are advantageous and conveniently provided. These are beneficial for the audience can view different sites that are recommended easily.

Top Sites Concerning Chemical Dependency

WWW.Quitnet.org

http://members.aol.com/aawebpage/index.html#schedule

http://www.hooked.net/users/ezdoesit/aa.htm

The Quitnet is a web site devoted to the subject of smoking cessation and deserves a place among the best of self-help web sites. The reason for this quite simply is that it is a complete site. It provides useful information about dependence, current issues in the news pertaining to the use of tobacco, an on line support group, guides for successful cessation, links to related sites, and information about other avenues of obtaining help. Perhaps most importantly the Quitnet also makes the statement that it is by no means a substitute for the advice of qualified health professionals.

The following web page is an excellent page for those seeking help via the internet with problems related to alcohol abuse : http://members.aol.com/aawebpage/index.html#schedule

This page is sponsored by America On Line as a service to those who wish to participate in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings on-line. The site includes a complete listing of scheduled meetings and direct access to them. It includes information about the Alcoholics Anonymous Organization and their methods of treatment. Overall, this website is an excellent example of steps that one might take toward treatment of alcoholism on the net.

The following page is another excellent example of accessible self help on the Internet: http://www.hooked.net/users/ezdoesit/aa.htm The page is brightly colored and pleasant to look at. Icons are neatly arranged and user-friendly. The page includes the stories of other alcoholics and how they came to grips with their problem and sought out help. It gives the user the opportunity to relate to others that are in similar situations. The page also listed alternative sites and allows direct access to them. In terms of feedback, a visitor to this site is invited to e-mail his or her own story to be posted on the page. Overall, this site was found to be superior in all aspects evaluated as part of this evaluation.

Preferred Sites Organized by Topic

Top three sites for anxiety disorders:

http://www.fairlite.com/ocd

http://www.algy.com/anxiety/index.html

http://www.geocities.com/hotsprings/1497/index

Top three parenting sites:

Parentsplace.com

Parenthoodweb.com

Cybertowers.com

Top Sites for Eating Disorders:

http://qlink.queensu.ca/~4map/anabhome.htm

http://nimh.nih.gov/publicat/eatdis.htm#eat1

http://mirror-mirror.org/eatdis.htm

http://www.something-fishy.com/articles.htm

Top Sites Concerning Chemical Dependency:

WWW.Quitnet.org

http://members.aol.com/aawebpage/index.html#schedule

http://www.hooked.net/users/ezdoesit/aa.htm

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